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SUBJECT: Irish Farmers Protest Government's WTO Stance

¶1. Irish farmers took part in a peaceful demonstration in Dublin in protest against the current EU stance at WTO negotiations on April 17. The protest took place as European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso addressed a forum discussing the future of the EU. Reportedly 10,000 farmers from all areas and sectors of the agricultural community took part in the rally and the numbers exceeded the organizers' expectations.

¶2. Many agribusiness related firms also stopped work for a number of hours in conjunction with the protest march. The leading farmers associations have claimed that the stance which the EC is taking in the current WTO negotiations could badly affect the Irish beef and dairy sectors.

¶3. The President of the Irish Farmers Association (IFA) warned the Irish government that farmers would not take the current proposals to cut import tariffs lightly and that such cuts would have an impact on how farmers vote in the EU Reform Treaty referendum. Irish voters go to the polls in June to ratify changes to the EU Reform Treaty.

¶4. In a radio interview, the Minister for Agriculture Mary Coughlan said she is taking the recent threat by farmers to vote 'no' in the forthcoming referendum seriously. She noted, however, that the referendum and the WTO talks are two different matters and that she was working to ensure that the outcome of the WTO talks is balanced, with the appropriate protections for Irish farmers and the agri-food sector. Ms. Coughlan said she felt that the majority of people in Ireland know that voting 'yes' on the Reform Treaty will be hugely important for Ireland.  
Foley